

Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard: A Representative Of Personal Sorrow And Grief

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Abstract

The poem is an elegy in name but not in form; it employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The paper will delve into how the poet celebrates the death of anonymous people and criticise the idea of fame and tombs erected on the burials of famous people only.

Keywords: anonymity, elegy, death, sorrow

Introduction:

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem by Thomas Gray, completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem's origins are unknown, but it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742. Originally titled Stanzas Written in a Country Church-Yard, the poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' parish church at Stoke Poges. It was sent to his friend Horace Walpole, who popularised the poem among London literary circles. Gray was eventually forced to publish the work on 15 February 1751 in order to preempt a magazine publisher from printing an unlicensed copy of the poem. The poem is an elegy in name but not in form; it employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The two versions of the poem, Stanzas and Elegy, approach death differently; the first contains a stoic response to death, but the final version contains an epitaph which serves to repress the narrator's fear of dying. With its discussion of, and focus on, the obscure and the known, the poem has possible political ramifications, but it does not make any definite claims on politics to be more universal in its approach to life and death. Claimed as "probably still today the best-known and best-loved poem in English", the Elegy quickly became popular. It was printed many times and in a variety of formats, translated into many languages, and praised by critics even after Gray's other poetry had fallen out of favour. Later critics tended to comment on its language and universal aspects, but some felt the ending was unconvincing—failing to resolve the questions the poem raised—or that the poem did not do enough to present a political statement that would serve to help the obscure rustic poor who form its central image.

This poem is about the writer's meditations on the mysterious countryman sleeping in the churchyard. The poet describes both auditory and visual sensations he observes and feels in that churchyard. The mournful sounds of the owls remind him of the dead resting in their graves. He laments they will be unable to enjoy the fruits of life: the happiness of home, wife, and work. He also comments on the fame and honors rich people enjoy in their lives. To him, the poor souls would have also accomplished great tasks only if they had the opportunity. Now, they are peacefully sleeping in their cells, and their plain graves reflect their simplicity and morality. In contrast, he describes the lavish funeral momentums of the rich that are prominent in the same churchyard. But nothing can restore life. Even in his epitaph, he asks us not to remember him as a wealthy, educated and great person. He wants to

be remembered as a melancholic, serious and sad person. He desires to be known as a common man whom he has praised and with whom he was going to be buried.

Death, the transience of life and memento mori are the major themes of this poem. Surrounded by death, the poem provides various images pointing out the contrast between life and death, the mortality and the difference between different classes after death. Throughout the poem, he develops the idea that every glitter becomes rusted on the face of death. He intends to present that the members of the lower class are worthy of praise as compared to the upper class even in the post-death period. Their simple, unreadable graves give a clue to their miserable lives. The poet refrains from glorifying the virtues of the wealthy and famous because they enjoyed fame while they were alive. He prefers acknowledging the morality and decency of those who led woeful yet satisfied life.

Death and Mourning

Even the proud and the mighty must one day lie beneath the earth, like the humble men and women now buried in the churchyard, as line 36 notes: The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Lines 41-44 further point out that *no grandiose memorials and no flattering words about the deceased can bring him or her back from death. Can storied urn or animated bust Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?*

The main idea of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a simple one: everybody dies. Sitting in a graveyard as the sun begins to set, the speaker mulls over the fact that death is universal. He thinks about the many kinds of lives that death cuts short, emphasizing the fact no amount of wealth, power, or fame can save people from death. At the heart of the poem, then, is the blunt fact that death comes for everyone: the rich, the poor, and the speaker himself. Since an "elegy" is a poem written to lament someone's death, the poem's title signals its themes right away. This elegy, it becomes clear soon enough, is for everyone who is buried in the "Country Churchyard," the graveyard attached to a rural church. It's also for everyone who will be buried there—which includes the speaker himself! In fact, the poem might as well be for all mortals, for whom the poem reminds reader's death is inevitable. This is a bleak sentiment to be sure, and the darkness that descends over the churchyard captures this sense of looming, inescapable mortality. Church bells signal the "parting day," leaving the speaker alone as night falls. Standing in the graveyard as the light fades, the speaker sees death everywhere, as if it suddenly envelops the world itself. Contemplating the humble graves all around him, the speaker is further struck by the fact that people die whether they're rich or poor. The graves in this churchyard might look like moldy mounds of dirt, but, the speaker insists, it's not like a rich person's more beautiful grave would somehow call them back from the dead!

The speaker reflects on the elaborate burials of the rich and powerful in order to hammer home the fact that death is universal. Some people may have "trophies" on their tombs, "urn[s]" and "bust[s]" that represent all their accomplishments, yet these things cannot "call the fleeting breath" back into the dead person's body. The "dull cold ear of Death" doesn't listen to "praise" for the dead person; even fame and "glory" can't defeat death, and when someone dies, the speaker implies, they're dead for good. The speaker even describes his own death, imaging how he will be buried "beneath yon aged thorn," under an old tree. The poem in fact ends with the speaker's imagined epitaph! From the gloomy omens at the beginning to the speaker's demise at its end, then, the poem is saturated with death—universal, inescapable, and final.

The Value of Commemorating the common people Dead

The speaker insists that death is universal and final—that it comes for everyone and can't be undone. At the same time, however, the poem speaks to the value of honoring, remembering, or even just imagining the lives of the dead. Doing so, the poem suggests, is a meaningful act of memorial for those whom the rest of the world, and history itself, has forgotten. What's more, the poem implies that such acts of commemoration may be a way to help people confront their own mortality. Memorializing the dead thus also helps the living. The people buried in the churchyard don't have elaborate memorials. The speaker describes their graves as "moldering heap[s]," mounds of dirt without the ostentatious decorations of rich people's marble tombs. At most, their graves have their names and the years they were alive. Still, their simple graves have a profound effect on the speaker, who starts imagining what kinds of lives these people might have led. He imagines them woken by the call of a rooster. He pictures them "[driving] their team" of oxen over the land, cheerful as they plow the soil. He speculates that one of them may have stood up to "the little tyrant of his fields" (i.e., a greedy landlord). In contemplating the lives of these people, he honors them. He sees their lives as full of meaning and authentic emotion. And this, in turn, illustrates the profound effect that even the simplest traces of the dead can have on the living.

These simple gravestones also lead people to contemplate their own deaths. The speaker describes how simple rural people often have poetry or Bible verses ("many a holy text") carved on their graves in order to "teach the rustic moralist to die." In other words, people like to carve sayings that provide some wisdom about death and dying. Visiting someone's grave isn't just about remembering someone's life, but about confronting death itself, and perhaps finding some way to accept it. The poem ultimately suggests there are two reasons to commemorating the dead: remembering and honoring those who are gone, and facing up to the fact of death.

Anonymity vs. Fame

As the speaker contemplates death, he focuses on all the common people who have died without fame, power, or wealth. In particular, he realizes that many people *could* have been great and famous if only they had grown up under the right circumstances. Rather than lamenting this fact, however, the speaker suggests that these people led less troubled lives than those in elite society. The speaker rejects wealth, fame, and power, and instead celebrates regular people living ordinary lives. Anonymity, the poem suggests, is better for the soul. The speaker imagines all the kinds of fame and power common people might have achieved if they'd been born in a higher class. First, the speaker represents this idea in **metaphorical** terms: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen." In other words, many flowers bloom with nobody to look at them. The same goes for common people, whose skills and powers may well go unrecognized. Next, the speaker imagines this potential in terms of past famous people. For instance, he imagines "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest": that is, someone buried in this graveyard might have been as great a genius as the poet John Milton. However, because the dead here were illiterate and confined to a rural trade, they never had the chance to write any glorious poems—rendering them metaphorically "mute," or unable to speak. All this wasted potential sounds pretty sad, until the speaker starts thinking about all the horrible people who have gained power throughout history. For instance, he mentions Oliver Cromwell, a dictator who ruled England in the middle of the 17th century. Someone buried in this churchyard might have had the same potential for injustice, yet because of his anonymity he never had the chance and is "guiltless of his country's blood." In this sense, the lives of common people prevent them from becoming monsters. Their "lot," or place in their world, "confined" their "crimes." Someone can't "wade through slaughter to a throne" if they're just a simple, unknown farmer living from one harvest to the next. All things considered, the speaker doesn't think wealth, power, or fame are worth it, preferring common people's "sober wishes." Regular folks want simple, understandable things like food on the table and a roof over their heads, the speaker says, and thus are never driven to "the madding crowd's ignoble strife"—to the grotesque conflicts of the powerful. Commoners, according to the speaker, live in "the cool sequestered vale of life." They keep their heads clear and find a measure of happiness. Finally, the speaker reveals that he identifies with this anonymity. In the epitaph at the end

of the poem, the speaker imagines himself as a young man who never received an education and died without fame or wealth. Although he dies full of “Melancholy,” or sadness, he also found a measure of peace in his anonymity. “[H]is soul was sincere,” and he dies without being polluted by wealth or fame. Life might not be happy, the poem implies, but at least anonymity grants people the chance to live and die in peace—without empty striving or cruel ambition.

Missed Opportunities

Because of poverty or other handicaps, many talented people never receive the opportunities they deserve. The following lines elucidate this theme through metaphors: *Full many a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, And waste its sw*

eetness on the desert air. Here, the gem at the bottom of the ocean may represent an undiscovered musician, poet, scientist or philosopher. The flower may likewise stand for a person of great and noble qualities that are "wasted on the desert air." Of course, on another level, the gem and the flower can stand for anything in life that goes unappreciated.

Virtue

In their rural setting, far from the temptations of the cities and the courts of kings, the villagers led virtuous lives, as lines 73-76 point out: *Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray; Along the cool sequester'd vale of life They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.*

What is Elegy?

Greek origin word elegy is the poetic expression of sorrow or mournfulness, which is usually associated with death. It has the tone of mourning and it is a song of lamentation. It was usually written to mourn the death of a friend or a dear and near one. Expressive both of personal grief and of preoccupation with universal concerns, it often combines the particular and the general, the emotional and the intellectual, to create the fusions of great poetry. In the words of Coleridge, an elegy “is the form of poetry natural to a reflective mind”. There is quite a difference in the writing of today's Elegies and Ancient Greece. Elegies from Ancient Greece were not written about death, but written about one's "true love." (Turner) At that time, the term denoted a particular rhythmic pattern rather than specific subject matter. The most famous Latin love-elegists, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid became models for poets of the English Renaissance, who used humor, irony, even slotted narratives into a poem and still called it elegy. They also composed funeral elegies of the type with which modern readers are familiar. Propertius wrote many of his elegies to his lover Cynthia, the prosperous member of ancient Greek society. (C.bevota, 2014) Until the 16th Century, the definition of elegy becomes a poem that is somber and melancholy in tone. ‘Shed No Tears’ is a poem that adheres to the definition of elegy. It is somber in tone and is a tribute to someone who has passed, but lives on in the heart of the writer. But at that time, elegy was only written on the death of celebrated and famous persons. Milton's Lycidas on the death of his friend Edward King and Tennyson's In Memoriam at the death of A. H. Hallim are the celebrated elegies. Walt Whitman wrote the famous elegy O Captain! My Captain! As a tribute to slain President Abraham Lincoln and P.B. Shelley's Adonais mourns the death of John Keats. Gray's elegy like other elegies of Milton, Shelley, Tennyson or Arnold is also a song of lamentation and mourning. But it is objective mourning whereas in the elegies of other poets the mourning is too personal. Though written to commemorate gray's friend, Richard West, the poem expresses grief over death in general. But he reflects upon death, the sorrows of life, and the mysteries of human life with a touch of his personal melancholy. And he honors the potentially great people who live and die in obscurity. In this context, Swinburne said “elegy as a poem of high perfection and universal appeal to the tenderest and noblest depths of human feeling”, and remarked as an elegiac poet, gray holds for all ages, his unassailable and sovereign station. In fact, due to the new form of the elegy and both its theme and poetic techniques, its popularity has transcended the limits of time and

place. It deals with the theme of death and the transitory quality of all worldly glory and human achievements. It also deals with the lot of common men on this earth. These universally appealing themes contributed much to the enduring popularity of the poem. The melancholic note of the poem is in keeping with the poetic taste of Gray's age and it enhances its appeal. (Gray's elegy written in the country churchyard, 2011).

A Representative of the Impersonal Class of Elegies

Gray's elegy is the best representative of the impersonal class of elegies. Here the poet doesn't lament at the death of a particular person; he mourns in a general manner for the lot of man. It mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The poet sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. He considers the fact that in death there is no difference between great and common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard there had been any natural poets or politicians whose talent had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived. Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* however, has earned him a respected and a well-deserved spot in literary history. The poem was written at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic period, and the poem has characteristics associated with both literary periods. On the one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rational sentiments of Neo-classical poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man. He provided a bridge between the Neo-classical style of his time and the Romantic era of John Keats. (Gray, 1751) *Interest in the Life of Humble People* In this funeral elegy, Gray shows a keen interest in the life of humble people and village craftsmen. These poor, and insignificant people who lie in the churchyard, have in death, become equal to the most famous and prosperous men of all times: death comes to all men. He is able to express how all must die, and it does not matter if one is rich or poor, a noble or a commoner, or a poet or a politician. He is also able to elevate the common man with the elegy as a tool and his own freedom in the use of word power and poetic style. (Be, 2008) There is little originality or novelty of thought or sentiment expressed in the *Elegy*. It expresses the feeling for the common man, which everybody has. The poet's views about death as an inevitable fact of life are quite common. The presentation of the contrast between the destiny of the rich and the poor is based on conventional views. The thought about fame and obscurity, human ambition and pride are quite old too. The *Elegy* abounds in what Tennyson calls 'divine truisms that make us weep'. However, Gray has lent great force to these common thoughts and truisms through his unique expression and has done it so beautifully, that they have become universally appealing. The commonest man finds the *Elegy* echoing his own feelings and sentiments. The poem transcends the limits of time and place, and appeals to people everywhere and in all times.

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